



ST. JOHN'S CHURCH

SAVANNAH

Worship in the Anglican Tradition

Ministry with Youth - What Motivates My Decisions?

The third pillar of ministry for the Youth of St. John's is virtue.

Love and Virtue

"What's love got to do with it?" The answer is: everything. Love is the driving force of our lives. The problem is, we tend to love the wrong things, or love good things too much. This is how St. Augustine described what's wrong with the world, "The essence of sin is disordered love." Loving the wrong thing comes naturally. The classic example is that children never need to be taught to say "mine!" Learning to love the right things in the right order is not natural. We have to learn it.

In his book, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, Jamie Smith channels centuries of Christian and pre-Christian wisdom, "The orientation of the heart happens from the bottom up, through the formation of our habits of desire. Learning to love (God) takes practice." This practice, this formation of habits in order to love God and our neighbor is what virtue is all about. Virtue is loving the right things (the true, the good, the beautiful) and being the right kind of person through practice.

Virtue as Music

One of the most wonderful and frustrating parts of being human is we are in process. We are always changing, and it is hard to be good. It would be nice to just snap our fingers and improve, but most things are not that simple. Being "in shape" takes practice, and so does being a virtuous and whole human. Smith says, "Learning virtue—becoming virtuous—is more like practicing scales on the piano than learning music theory: the goal is, in a sense, for your fingers to learn the scales so they can then play 'naturally,' as it were."

Virtue as Both/And

The idea of distinctly Christian virtue is a balancing act. It is so much easier to emphasize "following the rules" or "doing what feels right". Emphasizing virtue makes things more complicated. Virtue emphasizes the goal, which for Christians is looking like Jesus, and then asks: how do I get there? This does involve obeying Jesus' commands (Matthew 28:18-20), but it does not stop there. It is very easy to get into a mindset where following the rules is the goal. St. John tells us that God's commands are not a burden, but that does not mean his commands are easy, it means they set us free to be who we really are. Slowly, over a whole lifetime, we begin to act spontaneously in virtuous ways that reflect the image of God in Christ.

Becoming Who(se) You Are

There is a reason this series started with the gospel. Without Christ's life, death, and resurrection for our sins that gives us a new identity, there is no hope of virtue formation or reordered love. In Christ, we are set free to become who we truly are. St. Paul tells the Colossians, "Do not lie to each other." His next line is not, "because lying is bad and nice people don't do it". He says Christians should not lie because "you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator". We are back to the question of identity. In Christ you are not who you used to be. Your

old habits and practices do not define you anymore. You have been set free to live as you were created to, and to form new habits.

Virtue and Youth Ministry

There is no opting out of being formed. The question is, will the Youth of St. John's be formed to love the right things in a way that makes them more human, or in the wrong way that makes them less human? A list of do's and don'ts is insufficient for this. God's gospel, his hospitality, and the new life in Christ is the only vision big enough to capture the attention of the youth and point them to the good life. Through teaching, conversation, worship both as individuals and as a community, we will begin to be shaped into virtuous followers of Christ. Then we will be lovers of God and others. We hope to avoid how David Foster Wallace described society, "Today's sub-40s have different horrors... a peculiarly American loneliness: the prospect of dying without once having loved something more than yourself."